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# Moving from elite international schools to the world's elite universities

## A critical perspective

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore how elite International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) schools in China function as a channel for international student mobility to leading universities around the world.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To achieve this, the authors conducted a mixed-methods study combining quantitative analysis of 1,622 students' university destinations and qualitative analysis of interview data from five high performing and high tuition fee IBDP schools in China.

**Findings** – Results indicate that the IBDP in China can be conducive to a form of "elite international student mobility" for some students with 30 percent of participants attending one of the top 50 ranked universities globally. As an explanation, interview data points to the strong reputation of the program, the provision of structured opportunities for students to demonstrate "additional skills," and the abundant resources of elite schools.

**Originality/value** – The authors provide a critical discussion about the implications of the IBDP's function for "elite international student mobility" in connection with social contexts surrounding these international International Baccalaureate schools in China. In so doing, the discussion tackles two issues from a critical perspective: the role elite international schools in accelerating educational inequalities and challenges to authentic learning experience when elite schools play the "university admissions game."

**Keywords** China, Equity, Elite universities, IBDP, International student mobility

**Paper type** Research paper

There has been growing academic interest in elite schooling in recent years. A core issue in this regard is how elite schools seek to gain and retain advantages for their students in terms admissions to prestigious universities (Bourdieu, 1998; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Wakeford, 1969) and more recently (Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; Kenway and Koh, 2013; Khan, 2010). Despite this, there remain some limitations to the current body of research. Most notably, the vast majority of discussions have focussed on elite national schools and have been concentrated in North America and Western Europe. This is problem given that elite schools are not an "un-subjective, universal or timeless category" (Kenway and Koh, 2015, p. 1). In other words, what is deemed an elite school and the characteristics of elite schools is likely to vary

The authors appreciate the financial support and data supplied by the IB for this research project. Additionally, special thanks must go to the 14 participating schools for providing valuable in-house data and students, teachers and administrators from the five case schools. Finally, the views expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the research team.



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significantly over time and space. There have been steps to addressing this bias, with research emerging on elite schools a wider range of contexts including in Barbados (Greenhalgh-Spencer *et al.*, 2015), Brazil (Windle and Nogueira, 2015), Singapore (Koh, 2014), and South Africa (Kenway and Fahey, 2015), as some examples. Nonetheless, there remains a notable gap in the literature on elite schools operating the private international sector in East Asia.

In response, this paper shed lights on an expanding group of English medium-of-instruction elite international schools in China offering the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP). We note that these schools in China represent a discrete group from the wider literature on elite schools. In particular, they are a relatively modern phenomenon, with the first international school in China adopting the IBDP in 1991, and therefore may not have as entrenched traditions as elite national schools in other countries. Indeed, the expansion is indicative of wider processes of deregulation, marketization, and broader “hyper capitalism” (Bunnell, 2008, p. 383) of the international educational sector in the region. Also, the schools are especially notable for their global orientation in terms of student and staff body, curriculums offered (i.e. the IBDP), and the destinations of graduates for university studies. That is, despite being located in China in terms of “bricks and mortar,” the schools can be viewed as moving toward a transnational space (Tarc and Tarc, 2015), while some simultaneously retain certain links with countries associated with their foundation such as Canada, France, UK, and USA.

Elite international IBDP schools in China do share common characteristics with other elite schools and this also differentiates them from non-elite IBDP schools in other countries. First, owing to high school tuition IBDP schools are restricted to socio-economic elites in China. Specifically, they are an option only for those who can afford to pay approximately US\$30,000 per student annual tuition fees, in addition to a host of annual capital fees and debentures (Wright and Lee, 2014a). This contrasts with IBDP schools other parts of the world. For example, over half (56 percent) of International Baccalaureate (IB) schools globally operate in the public sector, with this figure increasing to 90 percent in the USA (International Baccalaureate, 2016a). Second, reflecting income received from high tuition fees, the IBDP schools can provide superior educational resources to students. This includes favorable teacher-student ratios, first-rate facilities, highly trained and qualified staff, and extensive provision of extra-curricular activities. In particular, the schools can afford to fully implement all aspect of the IBDP curriculum, which has been highlighted as financially challenging for less well-resourced IBDP schools in countries such as Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, and Turkey (Lee *et al.*, 2015), as examples. Third, international schools are exclusive in terms of being cut off or isolated from local communities in China. Notably, there are legal constraints on international schools enrolling a Chinese citizen which restricts the diversity of students. That is, despite having internationally diverse student and staff bodies, students may have limited opportunities to interact with other socio-cultural groups in China. This can be exacerbated by a concentration of students residing in expatriate housing compounds and language barriers (Wright and Lee, 2014b). Fourth, as will be emphasized in this paper, aided by substantial economic resources the schools are elite in academic terms. This includes high average scores in IBDP examinations, well-established links to leading universities worldwide, and an associated reputation among the families of prospective students.

Following this latter point, this paper will take a close look at how and to what extent elite international IBDP schools in China function as a channel to access the world’s prestigious universities. This issue is an especially important area of research

on elite schooling for at least three reasons. First, in the context of escalating wealth inequality globally (Piketty, 2014), including in China (Shi *et al.*, 2013), socio-economic inequality in access to elite schools is likely to remain a major concern, especially in terms of affordability of high tuition fees. Second, in an era of mass higher education, there is evidence that admissions to the most prestigious universities has become increasingly competitive, with meeting academic requirements often not a guarantee of acceptance. As just one example, average acceptance rates among Ivy League universities were only 8.8 percent for the 2015-2016 academic year (Jacobs, 2015). Third, attendance of prestigious universities continues to be closely associated with elite career trajectories (Rivera, 2011, 2015). In such an environment elite schools clearly have significant implications for understanding the social reproduction of privilege and barriers to meritocratic ideals in modern societies in China and beyond. Reflecting these issues, we focus on answering three research questions:

- RQ1.* What are the university destinations of IBDP students from elite IBDP schools in China?
- RQ2.* How do elite IB schools facilitate admissions to elite universities around the world?
- RQ3.* Are there any pedagogical challenges in elite international IB schools when playing the “university admissions game”?

### **IBDP schools: development, pedagogy, and curriculum**

International Baccalaureate (IB) schools have grown dramatically in popularity around the world in recent years (Lee *et al.*, 2012). Since 1999, the number of IB programs adopted by schools globally has increased by more than four-fold from 945 schools to 4,478 in 2016 (IB, 2016a). Amidst this expansion, China has evidenced a rapid increase in the number of schools adopting IB programs in general and the diploma programme (DP) in particular. As of 2016, there were 83 IB schools authorized to offer the IBDP across China. Of these, nearly all operate in the international schooling sector and 76 have been authorized since the year 2000 (IB, 2016a).

Despite the rapid growth of the IBDP in China, information on characteristics or demographics of IBDP students is scarce. We could identify only three studies exploring students at IBDP schools in China (i.e. Lee *et al.*, 2013; Wright and Lee, 2014a, b). A survey (Lee *et al.*, 2013) targeting IBDP graduates in 2011 and 2012 from IBDP schools in China, of 260 graduates they sampled, almost all indicated that they were foreign passport holders (99.6 percent). Furthermore, analysis of secondary data obtained from the IB (Wright and Lee, 2014a) indicated that the self-reported nationalities of IBDP students in China included countries in East Asia (63 percent of students), Europe (15 percent), North America (14 percent), Australasia (4 percent), and others (4 percent). To synthesize findings from these studies, while students in IB schools in China appear to be the children of expatriates, a majority of them have Asian heritage. Such findings are expected as there is a legal restriction in China that prevents mainland Chinese nationals from attending international schools[1].

An additional feature, as indicated in the introduction, is that a vast majority of the IB schools in China operate at the top end of the international private education sector. This categorization reflects that IB students are mainly from high socio-economic status families, given that IBDP schools in China charge among the highest tuition fees in East Asia. The combined median tuition fee of IBDP schools in the 2012/2013

academic year in Beijing and Shanghai was \$30,000 per annum. Such annual fees are considerably higher than IBDP schools in other parts of East Asia including Singapore (US\$22,000), Taipei (US\$18,500), Tokyo (US\$18,000), and Hong Kong (US\$15,000) (Wright and Lee, 2014a). A direct implication is that IBDP schools are unaffordable for the great majority of people in China where gross national income per capita equaled US\$7,400 in 2014 (World Bank, 2016). Moreover, this suggests that IBDP students in China are an elite sub-population, characterized by their high socio-economic status. As we will show below, the aforementioned demographic characteristics (i.e. foreign passport holders, high SES families) of IB students in China are related to how they play out in university admissions to the world's elite universities.

It is notable that the literature on the IBDP has been praiseworthy in terms of a view about the program being pedagogically progressive and highly effective for university preparation in equal measure (Hallinger *et al.*, 2011; Hill and Saxton, 2014; Stobie, 2007). A reputation for being the “Cadillac of College-Prep Programs” (Gehring, 2001) and the perceived benefits of the IBDP for international student mobility for university studies has undoubtedly contributed to the growth of schools offering the IBDP across China. The IB claims that at the core of its approach is an emphasis on “whole person” and “internationally oriented” education, rather than a narrow focus on technical knowledge (International Baccalaureate, 2013). Central in this regard, the program stipulates the completion of three “core requirements,” namely, creativity, action, service (CAS); extended essay (EE); and theory of knowledge (TOK), in addition to traditional subjects. First, CAS is a non-academic course structured around activities such as community interaction, service projects, expeditions, music, and sports (International Baccalaureate (IB), 2016b). Second, the EE is a 4,000 word essay that students are required to write under the supervision of an IBDP teacher (IB, 2016). Third, TOK seeks to introduce students to core philosophical issues and debates (IB, 2016b).

Of course, it is essential to view such descriptions through critical lenses in terms of self-promotion or marketing by the IB for its own programs. Indeed, the program has drawn criticism for favoring “westernized” forms of knowledge and identities as opposed to truly globalized perspectives (Poonoosamy, 2010). Nevertheless, it has also been argued that the “core requirements” can indeed provide students with structured opportunities to demonstrate a breadth of knowledge (Brunold-Conesa, 2010; van Oord, 2007) and evidence of so-called “twenty-first century skills” such as critical thinking, global-mindedness, and leadership (Wright and Lee, 2014b), which are deemed relevant for university studies. Further research has found that this positive perception of the program is often shared by university stakeholders, including admissions officers in the UK (Jenkins, 2003), Australia and New Zealand (Coates *et al.*, 2007), the USA (Gehring, 2001), and the Asia Pacific region (Hallinger *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2012). All of this implies that conceptions of the IBDP brand as being academically rigorous and educationally progressive have become accepted by a wide range of stakeholders including parents and universities (see Doherty, 2009).

At the same time, however, there has been mounting criticism of the IB, especially at IBDP schools operating in the for-profit private sector. This in part reflects growing concern about a lack of equality of access to IB schools, especially in East Asia due to high tuition fees and legal restrictions to admissions (Wright and Lee, 2014a). It has also been claimed that authentic implementation of the IBDP’s progressive pedagogy can be compromised when in conjunction with university preparation practices (cf. Hallinger, *et al.*, 2010). This is because the IBDP is a school-leaving certificate (Stobie, 2007) that may be constrained by the “university admissions game.” As a result, it can be argued

that the progressive educational philosophy, as professed by the IB, based on global-mindedness and twenty-first century skills is either neglected in the day-to-day realities of program implementation and/or implemented in a superficial manner. Instead, a core selling point of the program stems for reputation for providing a highly effective channel for students to access universities overseas and associated credentials, relative to their peers taking public examinations such as the Gaokao in China. Reflecting this, it can be further argued that in practice the IBDP has become associated with a means to join the ranks of transnational elites in educational and career pathways. That is, for highly mobile expatriate students in elite international schools, such as those in China, the IBDP can be seen as a tool to retain or enhance their position in global class stratifications through improving opportunities in increasingly competitive university admissions (cf. Lee *et al.*, 2012, 2013; Brown and Lauder, 2011; Tarc, 2009).

### Methodology

Our research team conducted a mixed-methods study employing a sequential explanatory design (Creswell *et al.*, 2003): quantitative analysis of IBDP school archival data on university entrance of IBDP graduates; and follow-up qualitative analysis of interview data from five-case study IBDP schools. As an initial recruitment method for quantitative data collection, a mass e-mail was sent out by the IBO to all of the IB schools in China which produced IBDP graduates as of 2012 – i.e., 43 IBDP schools. Based on this, 14 of the 43 schools provided valid data sets on university destinations without disclosure of student names. The final sample size comprised 1,612 IBDP graduates from 14 schools during the period between 2002 and 2012. In terms of data analysis, our quantitative analysis centered on whether there were any patterns in the university destinations of students in terms of geographical regions and university ranking over time. A series of descriptive analyses were employed in order to identify certain patterns of IBDP graduate university destination. These included frequency analysis and ANOVA tests.

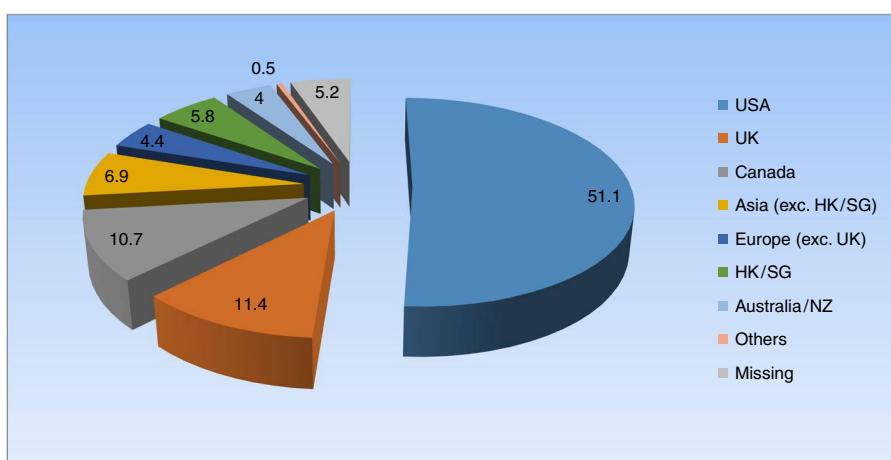
To expand and deepen the findings from our quantitative data, in mid-2013 we conducted a multi-site case study of five IBDP schools in China. Our aim was to seek more elaborated qualitative data on how and why particular learning experiences were perceived as helpful for university preparation and entrance by current IBDP students, headteachers, teachers, and coordinators. The case study schools were selected based on commonality. First, all of the participating schools were relatively high achieving in academic terms. For example, they all attained significantly high averaged IBDP exam scores in 2011 and 2012 that ranged between 34.5 and 37.0, which were higher than the average exam scores of IBDP graduates around the world (30.0) (cf. International Baccalaureate, 2012). Second, the schools were socio-economically elite in terms of charging relatively high tuition fees (an average of US\$33,000 per year across the five case schools). Last, the schools were all DP only schools. Previous research has identified that DP only schools often face more challenges in curriculum implementation relative to those providing the full IB continuum of PYP, MYP, and DP (Hallinger *et al.*, 2010). We collected data from interviews with ten administrators, 17 teachers, and 17 students enrolled in the IBDP. The administrators, comprising headteachers, and IBDP coordinators, were interviewed on a one-to-one basis. Conversely, to facilitate discussion among participants, teachers, and student interviews were conducted as focus groups, with an average size of four participants. Since we conducted semi-structured interviews with a standardized protocol, this iterative process of data collection functioned as a constant comparative method (Corbin and Strauss, 1998), while

the semi-structured design also enabled participants to elaborate on their answers or to highlight issues not thought of by the interviewers. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of participants. For our qualitative analysis, we began to identify themes related to our research questions after completing interviews at the first two schools. Once all the interviews had been completed, we constructed a coding scheme based on the emerging patterns. Put another way, we reduced large amounts of interview data into a smaller number of analytical units based on similar themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We also made several efforts attend to validity and reliability. Each of the interviewers coded the data independently and then checked the data coding with a partner. To better ensure coding reliability, inter-rater reliability (79 percent) was checked with 15 randomly selected interview files. Finally, we analyzed all of the data collected using the NVivo programme (NVivo 10).

Before reporting our major findings, we note several limitations in this study. Findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses may not be applied to all IBDP schools in China. As noted above, our quantitative analysis covered only 14 out of the 43 IB schools producing IBDP graduates as of 2012. Also, the 14 participating schools, including the five case schools, were relatively high performing schools in terms of IBDP examination scores and charged relatively high tuition fees. While this was advantageous to our focus on elite international schools, we admit that non-participating IB schools in China could offer different findings. Therefore, we await further investigations for a fuller picture.

### The university destinations of IBDP graduates

Our quantitative analysis revealed that from 2002 to 2012 the most population destination for graduates from IBDP schools in China were universities in the USA (see Figure 1). Slightly over half of IBDP graduates (51.1 percent) chose a US university for their higher education studies. The second most chosen destination were UK universities, which accounted for 11.4 percent of all the students. Other popular choices included universities in Canada (10.7 percent), Asia (6.9 percent, excluding Hong Kong/Singapore), Hong Kong/Singapore (5.8 percent), Europe (4.4 percent, excluding the UK), and



**Note:** n=1,612

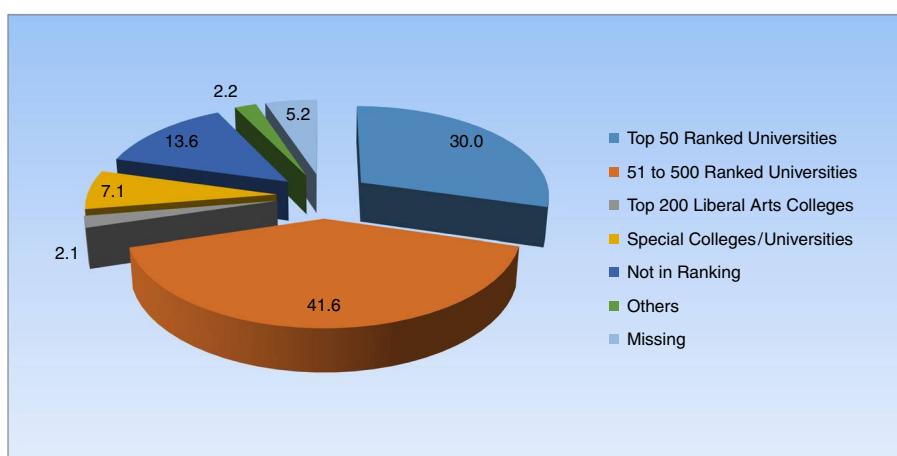
**Figure 1.**  
University  
destinations of  
IBDP graduates  
from 2002 to 2012  
by region/country

Australia/New Zealand (4.0 percent). It should be noted that nearly all (99.5 percent) of the IBDP graduates attended higher education institutions outside of China.

In terms of type and ranking of higher education institution, we identified five types of university destinations: world top 500 universities; universities not in world top 500; special colleges/universities; top 200 liberal arts colleges in the USA; and others. Specifically, to identify the first group of universities, we used three major university ranking tables published in 2011/2012: Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) offered by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, QS World University Rankings, and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings[2]. The second group was comprised of universities not ranked in any of the three ranking tables. The third group were specialized colleges/universities for hotel management, design, arts and music, and technology (e.g. Parsons the New School for Design, Royal College of Music), which were not considered by ranking tables. The fourth group was liberal arts colleges in the USA. We separated liberal arts colleges as a group because they were considered to be academically strong institutions despite not being included in ranking tables (Ruscio, 1987). The “others” were students who took a gap year, served in military service or did not attend university for any other reasons.

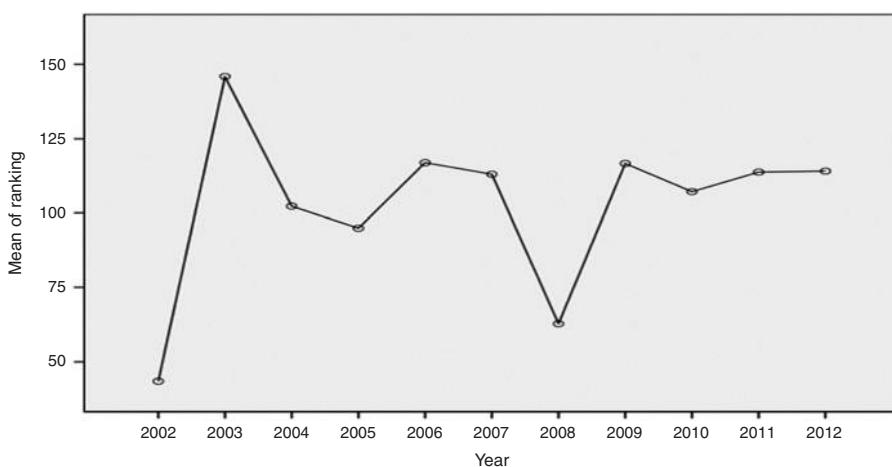
Based on this grouping, Figure 2 shows IBDP graduate university destinations from 2002 to 2012 by type of university and rankings. Notably, a majority of the IBDP graduates (71.6 percent) from 2002 to 2012 attended one of world top 500 universities. Further analysis of the data revealed that almost one-third (30.0 percent) of IBDP graduates enrolled at one of the top 50 ranked universities worldwide[3], while 7.7 percent attended a university ranked in the top 15 worldwide. Another 2.1 percent of graduates chose one of the top 200 liberal arts colleges; over one-quarter (26.0 percent) of IBDP graduates in this group attended one of the top 20 liberal arts colleges in the USA[4]. In addition, 7.1 percent of the graduates went to a specialized college/university. Approximately, 13.6 percent of the graduates attended a university not ranked in any of the ranking tables.

In addition, we identified that there was more variation within years than between years (see Figure 3) in terms of the pattern of university rankings during the period



**Figure 2.**  
University  
destinations of IBDP  
graduates from 2002  
to 2012 by university  
type and ranking

**Note:** n=1,612



**Note:**  $n=1,154$  (i.e. those who attended one of the world top 500 universities)

**Figure 3.**  
Average rankings  
of university  
destinations for  
ten years

between 2002 and 2012. Specifically, over ten years the average ranking of universities where IBDP graduates studied was quite stable (mean = 107.9, median = 71) whereas there were salient within-year variations (except 2002, for the rest of years, university rankings ranged from 3 to 475). The result of ANOVA also suggests that there was no significant change of average ranking across the ten years:  $F(10, 1,143) = 1.74, p = 0.067$ .

### How do elite IB schools facilitate admissions to elite universities?

Our quantitative analysis implies, therefore, that a significant proportion of graduates from IBDP schools in China gained admissions to high ranking institutions worldwide. Almost one-third (30.0 percent) of all IBDP graduates entered one of the top 50 ranked universities in the world, including the top 30 US universities. Further analysis revealed that 7.7 percent enrolled at a top 15 ranked institution, consisting of five of the seven Ivy League universities, Oxbridge, MIT, Caltech, Stanford, Chicago, UC Berkeley, Imperial, and UCL. As such, the destinations of IBDP graduates are not just notable in terms of their entrance to universities around the world but also striking in terms of admissions the world's elite institutions. In this regard, we wish to argue that for some students the IBDP at elite international schools in China served not just as a vehicle for international student mobility, but as a vehicle for what we coin as "elite ISM" for some students. That is, international student mobility specifically between a strata of elite schools and elite universities, which is an important point which differentiates elite IBDP schools in China to other international schools in the region.

While our multi-side case study explored the perceptions of IBDP administrators, teachers, and students rather than the views of university admission officers, the interviews illuminated a number of ways that elite IB schools may facilitate admissions to elite universities. First, teachers and administrators were confident that elite universities viewed the IBDP as a highly rigorous program. Similar reports about the growing academic recognition of the IBDP have been evidenced in prior research (see Coates *et al.*, 2007; Gehring, 2001; Hallinger *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Lee *et al.*, 2012). As a notable example, there was a shared belief that universities see the IBDP as having an especially stringent assessment and grading structure. It was frequently argued that the top IBDP grades

were held in higher esteem by many universities relative to highest grades in other programs. As one teacher contended, this helped elite universities to identify the most able from a pool of academically talented students in the admissions process:

They have no way of deciding who's the better candidate so Oxford and Cambridge have talked about imposing their own exams because they're finding it so difficult to differentiate between candidates and they have pointed out that kids who are getting 6s, 7s on the IBDP are both A\* level on the A-level. So they can really tell who the cream of the crop is by who is getting the 7s (School 4, Teacher 3).

In addition to the recognition of the rigor of the IBDP's assessment, there is second, probably more important, distinctive feature that was argued to provide certain advantages to IBDP students in the process of university admission:

I know that some university admissions offices have told us that they *do separate out* applications from IBDP candidates as they understand that those students bring with them *some additional skills* that maybe have not been acquired through an AP or A-Level programme (our own italics) (School 2, Headteacher).

Above all, the recognition of "additional skills" was reported as stemming from the IBDP's distinctive features such as CAS, EE, and TOK. These unique "built-in" components of the IBDP were argued to be a selling point in university admissions because top tier universities strategically seek to recruit students who are not just academically strong but also possess "a good or interesting character," especially in the USA (Khan, 2010, p. 103; Karabel, 2005). In a highly competitive environment whereby increasing numbers of similarly qualified students seek admission to a limited number of places at prestigious universities, the capacity of IBDP to offer students a structured means to demonstrate evidence of "additional skills" could offer a competitive edge in admissions. This included a general perception about the program being conducive to qualities such as global citizenship, communication skills, and critical thinking. More specifically, CAS, EE, and TOK, were viewed by the interviewees as resources for students to demonstrate a good or interesting character (or at least the image of such a character) that could impress university admission teams:

I know of one case, where one of my CAS students got a full scholarship because of her CAS work not because of her marks. We were raising funds for this IB tsunami relief fund in Indonesia (that was where I was). And she had done some brilliant work and recorded it beautifully. She didn't have the marks for admissions but when she went for the interview, they looked at her CAS and said, they wanted to give her a scholarship (School 1, Teacher 4).

Some of them are so proud of their [extended] essay, they sometimes take it with them to university interviews. They can talk intelligently about the minuscule detail of a plant growth experiment and how the algae went this way. It's amazing the kids can talk about something like that and I think that that's a great experience to have had (School 2, Coordinator).

We certainly see our students getting further in the interview process because they have been in a TOK class and can talk about themselves and what they believe [...] They can present themselves differently to just a book smart person (School 5, Coordinator).

The interview excerpts noted above highlight how "some additional skills" can play out in the process of university admissions. For these reasons, as seen below, it seems that IBDP candidates can be treated differently, because they are "IB" students:

I did not realise at first that the IBDP is an advantage to going to college until I had an interview with the University of Chicago. His words were "oh you are an IB student." After the

interview I actually asked why they invited me to the interview and they said that one of the reasons was because I was an IB student and they wanted to know more about me [...] I think it is an advantage as you learn so many things from community service to academic subjects (School 2, Student 4).

In sum, there was a strong perception among administrators, teachers, and students that elite universities valued the IBDP's structured holistic education achieved through the rigorous curriculum and assessment system alongside compulsory courses such as CAS.

Third, school resources matter. The elite IB schools in China were capable of providing abundant resources in the university application process, given their extraordinary financial capacity, based on high tuition fees and capital fees and/or debentures. This clearly contributed to the ability of the schools to effectively deploy the aforementioned "extra-selling points" through IBDP curriculum implementation and extra-curriculum activities. In this respect, it is not the IBDP per se that makes the schools elite but rather the capacity to provide the resources to fully take advantage of the structure of the IB curriculum to the benefits of students. An important example in this respect is the capacity of schools to finance resource intensive CAS projects, including projects that take place in other countries. It is likely that such projects may not be financially or practically viable at non-elite schools offering the IBDP, especially for schools in the public sector.

Perhaps more subtly, the interviews highlighted other factors that will have played an important role in the facilitating admissions to leading universities. Of various resources offered, it was noted that college counselors could be especially important resources for students. First, they molded high expectations about university entrance. Second, college and career counselors also offered practical information and guidance, including "lectures and talks about how to choose the right college for you" (School 5, Student 1), "workshops [...] for [college admission] interviews [...] and [providing] a list of colleges that would potentially suit students" (School 5, Student 1) and "online portals to compare college statistics" (School 5, Student 2). Third, college and career counselors organized trips to prestigious universities in order for students to meet university admissions officers informally:

The school has a counseling service where they help you to decide. They also offer a trip to the U.K. which I went on last February. We took a tour around London and went to a couple of different universities and had talks. That really helped us. There is also a trip to the U.S [...] I personally visited some of the U.S. universities over the summer (School 4, Student 3).

Furthermore, the counselors at the IB schools also arranged visits from elite university representatives:

We have regular college visits throughout the year from universities all over the world from Hong Kong to the U.S. to Europe. They really allow you to spend time interacting personally with the admissions people to see if that is what you want (School 5, Student 3).

We believe that such arrangements may be important not only for students but also for both counselors and university admissions officers. For the counselors, it is an opportunity to obtain more information about the types of students that admission officers are seeking to recruit. Notably, there are at least a dozen elite universities whose reputation and quality are seemingly equivalent (e.g. Ivy League universities, Oxbridge, Stanford, MIT), which require similarly high academic standards for admissions. Also, there are a number of IBDP students with similarly high IBDP exam scores. Under this situation, counselors could play a critical role in matching particular types of students with the most suitable type of university. Moreover, such interactions

can be beneficial in terms of helping councilors and their schools develop a reputation among elite institutions for “sending us good kids” (Stevens, 2009, p. 75). For the university admission officers, school visits would be strategically important for admissions officers as they may see elite IB schools as “rich pickings” to recruit international students whose families can afford to pay the increasingly high tuition fees for international students at elite universities. Through these seemingly “win-win” interactions, students are provided with ample resources to make informed decisions, which in turn is likely to be advantageous in admissions processes.

### **Pedagogical challenges and the “university admissions game”**

For both students and parents, the IBDP is increasingly viewed as an alternative channel to public education systems through which students can gain a competitive edge in overseas university admissions (Doherty, 2009). Interviewees noted that such conceptions may be especially strong among IBDP schools in China. We stress that this does not reflect vague and problematic stereotypes about “Asian” attitudes toward education (see Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Instead, it is likely a symptom of the way that the IBDP is marketed by the “hyper capitalism” (Bunnell, 2008, p. 383) of international schools seeking to attract prospective students and the corresponding expectation of families paying high tuition fees. For example, public communication materials of IB schools frequently highlight the number of students admitted into elite universities in the USA and UK (see Lee *et al.*, 2012). Resonating with this, the teachers and administrators in the five case schools reported pressures from some parents and students who view the IBDP as an instrument for elite university entrance:

We really preach the importance good fit. I know that there are consultants who will offer tips on the right things to say, the secrets to getting entry to getting to an Ivy League school, but we really believe it is not just about getting admitted but it is about enjoying success for all the years you are at school. For us it is best that the student paints a very honest portrait of themselves and then let the university decide if this is going to be a student who is going to succeed here or not. That creates some tensions because certainly some families say that “we spent a great deal of money to send our child to XXXX IB School so you should get them into Harvard” (School 1, Headteacher).

The interview excerpt above is indicative of tensions in authentic implementation of the IBDP in China. Specifically, the IBDP’s values such as global citizenship, inter-cultural understanding, and a whole-person education could well be stained in program implementation, if parents and students conceptualize the program as a narrow instrumental way to gain entry to top-ranking universities. For example, as we identified above, CAS was perceived to be an extra-selling point of the IBDP, whereby students can demonstrate evidence of a capacity for leadership or community service, which could be highly regarded by leading universities. Nevertheless, interview data showed that some students tended to treat CAS as a “box-ticking” exercise, given the binary nature of the assessment criteria, as simply pass or fail. Although there were some anecdotal stories of authentic implementation of CAS from our interviews, participants in four of the five schools reported that students often partook in CAS activities in a non-authentic manner. One headteacher described this common concern in the following way:

CAS is another example of something that is challenging to implement in an authentic way. The word “authentic” comes up a lot in the discussions of CAS. How do you avoid it simply becoming a linear, box-ticking process when the students can simply say “look I completed my hours?” (School 1, Headteacher 1).

## Elite international schools and educational inequality

The IBDP's function for "elite ISM" needs to be critically interpreted in connection with social contexts surrounding these international IB schools. Central in this regard is that IBDP schools in China charge relatively high annual tuition fees compared to IBDP schools in other countries. That is, IBDP students in China are an elite sub-group of IBDP students worldwide, defined by their high socio-economic status and attendance of especially resource rich schools. As such, the high tuition fee income received by IBDP schools in China is especially conducive to taking full advantage of the potential of the IBDP (e.g. running resource intensive CAS projects) and providing additional support (e.g. arranging trips to prestigious institutions abroad and visits from admission officers) to enable a process of "elite ISM." In this respect, our research builds on the recent wave of elite schooling literature, which has largely focussed on national schools, rather than international IBDP schools (Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; Kenway and Koh, 2013; Khan, 2010).

We wish to note that the expansion of such elite international IBDP schools in the China and indeed across East Asia has important implications for equality of opportunity for students to access elite universities. Inequality in terms of accessing high quality schooling is far from a new area of contention (cf. Mills, 1956). Yet, trends of rapidly expanding global wealth inequality (Piketty, 2014) in conjunction with increased marketization of education in China (Zhao and Qiu, 2012) and beyond (Sandel, 2012) means that the capacity of those from high socio-economic backgrounds around the world to "buy" an elite education has expanded and is likely to continue to expand in the future. That is to say, the growth of elite international IBDP schools in China can be viewed as a way in which a minority of are able to draw upon financial capital to provide their children with superior opportunities to gain admission to elite higher education institutions worldwide.

While attending an elite IBDP international school may be a rational decision among the minority of families who can afford the high tuition fees, the effect is likely to be growing socio-economic imbalance in educational opportunities (see also Bunnell, 2008). In other words, the educational advantages provided to students at elite IBDP international schools in China and among other elite schools mean that talented students from less affluent backgrounds may be less able to compete in university admissions. Indicative of this, it has been estimated that the average income of the parents of students who attend Harvard University is equal to the top two percent income hierarchy in the USA or US\$450,000 per year (Piketty, 2014, p. 485). This is particularly pressing in the context of growing stratification among universities and research illuminating that employers in high pay sectors such as finance and law often recruit exclusively from elite institutions (Rivera, 2011, 2015).

## The Skyboxification of education

As the IBDP in China remains elitist by limiting admission to students from wealthy family backgrounds, it seems likely that there are social divides between IBDP students and local communities. This is especially likely given additional language and cultural barriers alongside the issue that many expatriates in China reside in particular housing compounds (Wright and Lee, 2014a). Indeed, teachers and administrators reported that an implication of some IBDP students' instrumental use of CAS (e.g. "box-ticking") was that, despite being of Asian or Chinese heritage, some IBDP students may not take advantage of opportunities to interact with other communities in China in an authentic manner. That is, some IB students may only focus on certain activities when they can

be databased as numbers or lines that can be added to their résumé, signifying a “good or interesting character” (Khan, 2010, p. 103), which could appeal to elite universities (cf. Karabel, 2005). This reinforces the findings of prior research, which has illustrated that despite seeking to present progressive images of cosmopolitanism, elite international schools often have limited or shallow interactions with their counterparts in the public schooling system and the wider community (Hayden, 2006; Kenway, 2013).

Reflecting these concerns, we propose a research agenda for future studies. That is, we view the exclusivity of the IBDP in China as indicative of what Sandel (2012) described as “skyboxification” referring to the trend that in increasingly market-based societies – where money can buy more things – people from different socio-economic backgrounds are living more and more in physical, cultural, and socio-economic isolation (Lee *et al.*, 2015). More specifically, we think that the conduciveness of the IBDP in China to “elite ISM” could elongate IBDP students’ experience of “skyboxification.” This is because our study suggests that students could progress from an elite IBDP school in China to complete their higher education at another elite institution abroad, while having limited opportunities to interact and engage with local populations. Put another way, such students could complete both their secondary and higher education in a “skyboxed” educational environment, through which they are more likely to have opportunities to join the world’s privileged classes. Such a trajectory is clearly problematic for the IBDP’s emphasis on “whole person” education given that students may have limited opportunities to engage and interact with people from other socio-economic or cultural backgrounds throughout their education. Furthermore, this indicates that progressive educational ideals associated with global citizenship and inter-cultural understanding may not be effectively implemented despite the resources of the schools and international orientation of the IBDP. In this regard, our research underlines concerns outlined in Chandran Nair’s keynote speech at the European Council of International Schools Conference in 2010 on the exclusivity of elite international schooling:

[...] most of them [students in elite international schools] certainly don’t have the interest apart from their fleeting involvement in elite voluntary programmes which enhances résumé [...] They grow in a world removed from the threat of arsenic laced water, endemic malaria and subsistence farming, situations which form a daily reality for hundreds of millions of people across the world. The solution is not to reduce richer students to poverty, but to make them aware that their view of the world is inevitably colored by their wealth [...] (Nair, 2010).

We note that success in tackling such issues is likely to remain major challenge in the context of an emphasis on the “university admission game” in many elite international schools around the world. In response, we call for more research on elite international schools, especially IBDP schools, to explore how educational policy makers and practitioners can better provide a genuinely “whole person” education for students.

### Notes

1. A minority of students with Chinese nationality may negotiate access to international school via having residency in other countries.
2. For example, the University of Cambridge was ranked at 5th (ARWU), 2nd (QS), and 7th (The Times). The average ranking for the University of Cambridge (i.e. 4.7) was allocated to students who attended the University of Cambridge.

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3. In their respective order, the top 50 ranked universities included: Harvard University; Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); University of Cambridge, California Institute of Technology; University of Oxford; Princeton University; Stanford University; University of Chicago; Yale University; Columbia University; University of California, Berkeley; The Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine; University of Pennsylvania; University College London; Cornell University; The Johns Hopkins University; Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich; University of California, Los Angeles; University of Michigan – Ann Arbor; University of Toronto; Duke University; The University of Tokyo; Northwestern University; University of Wisconsin – Madison; University of Washington; University of British Columbia; The University of Edinburgh; McGill University; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Kyoto University; New York University; University of California, San Diego; The University of Manchester; Carnegie Mellon University; The Australian National University; The University of Texas at Austin; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; King's College London; Brown University.

4. This is based on the 2011/2012 National Liberal Arts College Rankings published by US News and World Report.

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